

VOLGA GERMAN WEDDING CUSTOMS

"January 28 was a big day in the house of Jakob Staab's family (Sr.). There was a doppel-wedding:

"Athanasius Karlin was united in marriage to Dorothea Schütz and Justus Walter to Maria Karlin.

"Reverend Pater Joseph Callazana, O.M. Cap. married them. After the ceremony it went to Friedrich Karlin's house where all the Catharinenstadter had been invited to, even Franz Pollifka and his wife, to celebrate the doppel-wedding feast. -The trousers of the bridegrooms suits cost 2.25 Dollars a pair, the coats had been tailored at Catharinenstadt and cost 2 Dollars each, that is 4.25 a suit and how proud they were in it. The veils of the brides were blue, woolen and cost 18 cents the yard. The couples were and still are, anyhow, very happy. The wedding-feast lasted 3 days. The band consisted of Dosche Wasinger, the old Lies and two men from Liebenthal. How they all danced and Russian, too! To have such a wedding, there has to be many there. We were lucky enough to have still left of 1878, 90 bushels of wheat, mixed with so much rye that it couldn't be sold sooner. We sold it now for Dollars ^{18¢} 90 cents a bushell, which paid for half a barrel Whiskey, 32 gallons and 15 gallons of wine. The other half was paid for by the Walters. We and Walters had enough meat from our own stock."

From "Reminiscences from the Life of
Athanasius Karlin"

Marriage in a Volga German village was a festive time - a holiday celebration for friends and relatives. All of the events that took place from courtship through the wedding were traditional. Everyone knew what to expect next and looked forward to each step of the marriage process.

First, a young man picked out whom he wished to marry. She almost always was from the same village and of course knew that he liked her. The prospective groom's father and godfather or his two best friends would then act as matrimonial agents or Freiersmanner. Der Freiersmann went with the young man to the prospective bride's home. There, while the suitor lowered his head in silence, der Freiersmann talked to the girl and her parents about their friend's virtues and asked if she would marry their friend. Once the girl and her family had consented, and a dowry of money or household goods had been agreed upon, the couple was engaged.

The next step was to invite friends and relatives to the wedding. Traditions were different in different villages, but in many Volga German settlements, the fathers of the couple-to-be chose two men known as Einlader to go from house to house inviting people to the wedding. One Einlader started at one end of the village, the other at the opposite end. As each one went from one house to the next, he recited a verse of invitation:

Tis not on horse with much ado,
Tis staid on foot we come to you,
Of bride and groom to be in lieu;
They now invite you, one and all:
Be wedding-guests, both great and small
Ten geese shall die, and not one hen,
No, not one less than nine and ten,
And too, the ancient chanticlear,
As plump and round as wheel or sphere.
Aunt Kate the spoon and pan will wield,
The dumplings firm and fat to yield.
To suit the most exacting taste;
And beets as well she'll bake and baste.

Dear me! Forgot I not the best,
The brandy that awaits the guest?--
Now round my rod a ribbon twine
That I may tell you place and time.

After he had finished, the invited family tied a ribbon on the cane of the Einlader to show that they would come to the wedding. The cane was sometimes a walking stick, or a buggy whip, or might even be an iron rod from the end-gate of a farm wagon. Then the Einlader told them the time and place of the wedding. They gave him a drink of schnapps or Quast and he headed to the next house.

Long before the modern bachelor's party or rehearsal dinner, Volga Germans celebrated the Polterabend on the night before the wedding. Only those who had helped prepare for the wedding attended. As always, there was much to eat and drink, dancing and singing. The bride and the groom were not invited.

Finally, the day of the wedding arrived. Everyone gathered in the morning at the home of the bride's parents. The groom and bride knelt facing each other

on a white sheet and were sprinkled with holy water. Then they received the blessing of their parents.

From the home, the entire wedding party walked to the church, the bride in front of the groom. However, at the end of the wedding and for the rest of their lives, the wife would always walk behind the husband. A small band accompanied the group, playing traditional music. In Catherine and some other villages, friends of the groom would shoot shotguns in the air as the wedding party approached the church, and as they left.

Marriage was an especially dignified and impressive religious ceremony. High Mass was said and the couple exchanged vows at the altar. The bride wore a fancy dress decorated with lace or embroidery work. It was not like the traditional white wedding gown of today. On her head, she wore a wreath of flowers with a veil attached to it.

The groom wore his best suit with a boutonniere attached to the lapel of his jacket. The boutonniere was an arrangement of flowers with a bow and long ribbons fastened to it that hung to the groom's waist or sometimes even to his ankles. As the bride and groom prepared to leave the church, they were confronted by two altar boys who had strung a rope across the door. The groom's attendants had to pay the boys a ransom to free the bridal couple. This traditional part of the ceremony completed, the couple returned to the bride's home to the festive sounds of a brass band.

The wedding feast started at the groom's house right after the ceremony. Tables groaned with all the food and drink prepared for the guests. While the bride and groom pretended to eat (they would eat alone later), someone would steal her shoe, making it impossible for the bride to dance later on. When the "thief" made it known it was he who had stolen the shoe, he would agree to auction it off to the Brautfuehrer or best man and the money was given to either the cooks or the bride.

After dinner, the tables were cleared away and the Hochzeit or wedding celebration began. At the start of the Hochzeit, everyone grabbed a glass of beer or wine and stood next to the band as they sang the Braut Tusch or Bride's Toast.

Braut Tusch

1

Sing mit froehlichem Gemuete,
Brautigam mit deiner Braut.
Die dir Heute Gottes Guete,
Zur Gehilfin anvertraut.

Das sie dich in Angst und Plagen,
Troesten soll in dieser Welt.
Und die Buerde mit dir tragen,
Welche dir beschwerlich faellt.

2

Tretet froehlich zum Altare,
Betet Gott mit Ehrfurcht an.
Dessen Guete viele Jahre,
Euch gesund erhalten kann.

Bittet Jesum um den Segen,
Ladet Ihn zur Hochzeit ein.
Denn daran ist is gelegen,
Wenn ihr vollet gluechlich sein.

3

Reicht einander Hand und Herzen,
Redlich ohne Heuchelei.
Trachtet dass in Freud und Schmerzen
Eure Treue standhaft sei.

Immer soll die Liebe brennen,
Nach dem Goettlichen Gebot.
Niemand sol die Ehe trennen,
Niemand als allein der Tod.

1

Sing with gay and cheerful spirit,
Bridegroom with your lovely bride.
Whom today God has entrusted,
As a helper at your side.

May in all your fears and troubles,
She your consolation be.
And with you share all the burdens,
From all sorrow you'll be free.

2

Cheerfully kneel at the altar,
With deep feeling, to God pray.
Ask that in his loving goodness,
You'll enjoy good health each day.

Ask dear Jesus for his blessing,
Invite him as wedding guest.
That's a rule for all good people,
If you want your marriage blest.

3

Extend hand and heart to each other,
Be upright, and honest and true.
That in all your joy and sorrow
Your strong faith will sustain you.

May your love-light burn forever,
It is written in God's command.
May your marriage never waiver,
Until death, your love must stand.

Next, bride and groom walked slowly around the room as the band played the Braut Reih or Bride's Walk. Guests pinned money to her dress and filled her arms with gifts. Then, the couple began the first dance and from then on until the

wee hours of the morning, the guests danced waltzes, schottisches, polkas, and hochzeits. They sang folksongs and ate and drank all evening. In the early days the Hochzeit might last three full days. Later, the celebration became a one-day affair. At the end before everyone left for home to recover from the party, they sang this song:

1. Schoene gute nacht wenn ich Heim It is a beautiful good night when I
 soll geh'n. should go home,
 Tut mir meinem Kipf so weh, My head pains me terribly,
 Meinem Kipf der tut mir weh, My head pains me terribly,
 Schoene gute Nacht wenn ich Heim It is a beautiful good night when I
 soll geh'n. should go home.

2. Schoene gute nacht wenn ich Heim It is a beautiful good night when I
 soll geh'n, should go home.
 Tut mir meinem Leib so weh, My stomach pains me terribly,
 Meinem Leib der tut mir weh, My stomach pains me terribly,
 Schoene gute Nacht wenn ich Heim It is a beautiful good night when I
 soll geh'n. should go home.

3. Schoene gute nacht wenn ich Heim It is a beautiful good night when I
 soll geh'n, should go home,
 Tuen mir meine Fuess so weh, My feet pain me terribly,
 Meine Fuess die tuen mir weh, My feet pain me terribly,
 Schoene gute Nacht wenn ich Heim It is a beautiful good night when I
 soll geh'n. should go home.